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ABSTRACT

A study administered a 12-item questionnaire to 35 (15 males, 20 females) African-American students (recent high school graduates with a mean age of 17.5 years) enrolled in a university summer enrichment program to examine how their language in casual conversation differed from that of adults. The questionnaire was administered after the final exam on the last day of class, and "casual speech" was defined as that variety of speech used when students gathered to socialize. Results confirmed the hypothesis that the speech of adolescent African Americans differed significantly from that of adult African Americans. In addition, tables showing the chosen words used for various descriptive situations suggest that there were differences according to gender. Drawbacks to the study include the small number of stimuli items used on the survey and the absence of a comparison group or groups. Unmindful of these shortcomings, this preliminary analysis should contribute to the ongoing dialogue of language study in the African American community. (Contains three tables of data, eight notes, nine references, and a copy of the questionnaire.) (TB)

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LANGUAGE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

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Language and African-American Youth

Language study, specifically its oral form, reveals a community's values, beliefs, attitudes, and so on. In addition, a study of language allows the investigator to draw reasonable conclusions about members of a speech community. By speech community, we mean that members of a community interact quite often with other members, share a common set of language features (e.g., phonological, lexical, syntactic), and have at least one other variety to communicate among themselves or with members of other speech communities (Fishman 29).[1]

It should be noted that no speech community, except in rare instances of remote isolation, share one language variety. On the contrary, members of a speech community have other varieties which they use in other speech situations. For example, individuals will use one form of speech to address family members, another to a young person, and another to a public or to a religious official.

The notion of a speech community, although a quantitative factor, can range from two persons to millions. It is as if the Biblical admonition of gathering by two's or three's was meant to apply to a speech community. For that matter, the notion of a speech community, that is, size and language variation, would be applicable to students on a university campus. Assuming further that the concept of a speech community is applicable to a university campus, we may also examine the speech used by members of that community, in this case, university students.

RELATED STUDIES

The study of campus speech is not new. As early as the 1960's, analysts examined the speech of university students to determine its specific characteristics (Dundes and Schonhorn 163-177; Kratz 188-95). Recent studies, however, which have examined campus speech, have been devoted primarily to slang (Dumas and Lighter 5-17, Eble 215-217). Other studies on slang were directed at such issues as naming various crowds in an academic setting (Brown and Lohr 47-55; Eisminger 280), and at slang and semantics (Eble 433-41).

Background to Study

The present study was the result of frequent interaction with students as I observed their use of language in casual speech on a university campus. I was chiefly concerned with their use of lexical items, as opposed to pronunciation (phonology), or syntax. For this paper, we define casual speech as that variety of speech used in specific instances and which pertained to specific topics.[2] By instances, we mean those occasions before and after classes in which students gather to socialize. For topic of conversation, this idea pertains to issues in the students' lives - dance, movies, dormitory verbal exchange, music, and parents.

In many instances, I noticed that students used terms which were different from what I used, or for that matter, from what adults of my generation would use. As a matter of fact, I had to ask for the meaning of some of the terms used by the subjects. As we mentioned earlier, it was the lexicon with which I was most interested.[3] As one student remarked, "Suppose you are trying to hit." I did not know that the term "hit" meant "to have sex."

With the foregoing as background, this investigator sought to explore the hypothesis that the speech of adolescent African Americans, especially that variety used on a university campus, differs from adult speech, primarily African American adults.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects for this study (n=35) were recent high school graduates enrolled in a university summer enrichment program. The subjects were 15 males and 20 females, with a mean age of 17.5 years. They were given provisional acceptance to the university, provided that they successfully completed enrichment courses in English, mathematics, and reading/study skills. Residential patterns suggest that the subjects were from a lower- to middle -income background. All were African Americans.

Materials

For this study, this investigator prepared a twelve-item questionnaire consisting of items considered to be part of the subjects' verbal store. The items were designed to represent topics of interest found in the casual conversation of the subjects. Consequently, topics dealing with clothing, education, and social interaction were included in the survey.[4] (See Appendix A for the complete questionnaire)

Procedure

As the summer session progressed, I informed the subjects that I would like to learn more about the style of speech used in casual conversation. They assured me that they would be happy to enlighten me. On the last day of the session, when they were finished with final examinations, and to create a leisurely atmosphere, I administered the questionnaire with instructions that they should provide the equivalent form in casual speech for the stimulus items presented on the questionnaire. Since the study was primarily descriptive in purpose, frequency measures was the statistical analysis used for the data.

Results

An examination of the subjects' responses confirmed the hypothesis that adolescent speech, in many instances, differed significantly from that of adults. (See Table 1) In addition, there were differences in the

responses, in some instances, when gender was considered. (See Table 2)

Concerning the confirmation of the hypothesis, this idea is not surprising and would be obvious to a casual observer. Observational data would show a correlation between language use and such variables as age, location, sex, and socioeconomic status. In addition, speakers tend to use language as a reflection of their feelings, ideas , and their perception of events in the world.

TABLE 1

Responses to Terms to Define on the Questionnaire (n=35)

(Responses %)

Terms or Phrase			
1. One who is a serious student or studies frequently	Smart 20	Geek 20	Nerd 42.85
2. The act of studying	Studying 31.42	Hitting the Books 8.5	
3. A "hit" record	Tight 11.4	Bomb 22.8	Crank 14.2
4. An apartment or a house	Crib 57.14	House 14.28	Pad/Place 8.57
5. A young man who dresses well	G.Q. (Smooth) 14.28	Outfit is sweet 8.57	Bomb 5.71
6. A young woman who dresses well	Bomb 8.57	Joint look 5.71	Fly 8.57
7. A good dancer	Good dancer 11.42	Can Dance 8.57	
8. The act of dancing	Dancing 11.42	Freaky 8.57	Grooving 5.71
9. To have sexual intercourse	Hit 28.57	Knock the boots 8.57	Boning 8.57
10. A good talker	Smooth 14.28	Yepper 8.57	Rap 8.57
11. To cope with Unpleasant situations	Deal 11.42	Stressed 8.57	Ride it 8.57
12. To have a good time	Chillin 17.14	Party(ing) 14.28	Having fun 11.42

TABLE 2

Gender Differences in Responses

Items	Female Responses	Male Responses
1. A serious student	Nerd	Smart, Geek
2. A "hit" record	Joint, Crank	Slammin, Jam, Bomb
3. An apartment or a house	Crib	Pad
4. A young man who dresses well	Cute, Sweetie, Bomb	G.Q., Mack
5. A young woman who dresses well	Sweet	Fly Girl
6. To have sexual intercourse	Groove on, Get freaked on, Knock Boots	Bone, Hit
7. To cope with unpleasant situations	Squash it	To deal, Ride

Secondary Findings

As was mentioned above, our findings included differences in gender, variation in responses, and the quantity of responses.

Gender Differences

In an analysis of the data, we found that there were differences in the way in which males responded to an item(s), as opposed to females. For example, in response to the stimulus " a young man who dresses well," males usually responded with the phrase ,"G.Q. " and "mack." On the contrary, for the same stimulus, females used the words "cool," "sweet," "fly," among others. Gender differences in choice of language has been documented by various analysts of language use and users (Folb 212; O'grady et al. 335-336).[5]

Variation in Responses

In addition to the issue of gender differences in responses, we observed that some subjects used varied word forms, although the meaning of terms was preserved. For example, in response to the stimulus , " to have a good time," subjects gave such forms as "chill", "Chillin'," and "chilled." These "surface" forms of language are not as important as their "deep" or semantic realizations since speakers have varied ways of conveying similar ideas.[5]

Quantity of Responses

Another feature in our analysis of subjects' responses was that some stimuli elicited more responses than did others. Examples of greater response items were "nerd" and "geek" for "one who is a serious student, and "crib" for "an apartment" or "a home." On the contrary, some words received relatively few responses. Examples of the latter were those items used to elicit words for " a good dancer" and "to cope with unpleasant situations." (See Table 3)

This observation of greater than and less than answers could be attributed to the topic being discussed by participants in the study. In other words, what the subjects talked about in casual speech is related to the

frequency of that item appearing on the survey form. For example, the responses for "an apartment or a house" were greater than those which involved " an individual who dances well." The assumption is that living quarters might be more central to the participants than choice of clothing.

TABLE 3

	Rank Order of Items Without Responses (%)
1. Stressed	74
2. A good dancer	51
3. The act of dancing	43
4. A good talker	43
5. A young man who dresses well	40
6. The act of studying	37
7. To have sexual intercourse	31
8. To have a good time	29
9. A young man who dresses well	26
10. One who is a serious student or studies frequently	23
11. A "hit" record	17
12. An apartment or a house	14

Another possible reason for the low response rate to certain items could be attributed to a "hidden purpose." By hidden purpose, we mean that the subjects could have intentionally hidden the meaning or were unwilling to reveal their knowledge of that item to the investigator. As a matter of fact, the Hawthorne effect might be at work here. In other words, the subjects might have responded differently since they knew that they were being observed. In addition, the subjects might have selected to give no response since their intended responses would have been considered socially undesirable. This latter position seems tenable as was observed when one participant said to another, "I know you are not going to write that."

This observation on the quantity of responses is related to Fishman's argument that lexicon and behavior are related (102). Moreover, as he contends, "lexicons... are reflective of the speech communities that employ them" (104).[6] Thus, the notion of a speech community as defined in this paper and its use of language, in this case words and phrases, is supported by the foregoing analysis by Fishman.

Drawbacks to Study

The present study, of course, has some weaknesses. The most salient, in this author's view, are the number of stimuli items used on the survey and the absence of a comparison group or groups.

Although numbers in and of themselves are not direct threats to research designs, in certain research protocols, the number of items, trials or patients can influence the results of a study. The investigator(s) must take such issues into account to minimize drawing invalid conclusions or inferences. This observation is applicable to this study since this investigator does not want to overreach in the analysis regarding the number of survey items or the number of subjects selected for the study.

In language studies, however, the issue of sufficient or insufficient stimuli items or subjects depends on the purpose of the study. If the investigator is interested in the speech of one individual, then it is obvious that that analysis would be confined to one person. On the other hand, if the analyst decides that the work is exploratory (e.g., a pilot study), the appropriate number of subjects would also be different from a study which claims proper sampling techniques and randomization of participants.

These points must be considered when the issue of numbers poses a threat to research designs.[7]

In addition to the number of cases or subjects, the presence of a comparison group gives greater weight or validity to a study. In our study, no comparative group(s) exists. The analyst used his knowledge of African-American adult speech as a basis for comparison to adolescent speech. Needless to say, no individual knows the range of speech varieties in a speech community, and elements of bias can enter into an interpretation of the data.

What can be said, however, is that this study is descriptive in that it is used to explain phenomena as it exists. At the same time, it could be argued that descriptive studies provide the basis for more complex study designs (DeAngelis 49).

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the hypothesis that the casual speech of African American youth differed from that of American adults when lexical items and phrases are compared. In some instances, there were significant differences between these two categories of speakers; in other instances, no differences were observed. In addition, we observed that gender differences and the quantity of responses were other outcomes of the study. Unmindful of certain shortcomings, this preliminary analysis should contribute to the on-going dialogue of language study in the African American community.

NOTES

1 Earlier work which addressed the issue of speech communities were conducted under the general topic of dialectology. The interest was on regional differences in pronunciation and vocabulary choices to establish linguistic boundaries or isoglosses.

2 This definition of speech allows us to narrow language study to a specific context regarding what is said, by whom, and on what occasions.

3 Of course, other linguistic structures were also observed. They included phonology, syntax, intonation, and pause markers (e.g., well, you know, know what I'm sayin').

4 The purpose and time of the study limited the number of items which could have been included.

5 Quantitative and qualitative studies of language involving gender suggest that women, for example, use different request forms and interrupted speech less often than did males.

6 In his work, **Sociolinguistics,** Fishman points out that a lexicon reflects the concerns and interests of those who employ it, and this observation seems tenable in this report.

8 See Otto D. Payton's, **Research; The Validation of Clinical Practice**, for a fuller discussion on research design and adequate sampling procedures.

APPENDIX A

Student Language Questionnaire

Sex _____
Age _____

Please help me learn more about colloquial expressions. In the space to the left, write the word or phrase which is used most often in everyday speech among your peers.

1. _____ One who is a serious student or studies frequently
2. _____ The act of studying
3. _____ A "hit" record
4. _____ An apartment or a house
5. _____ A young man who dresses well
6. _____ A young woman who dresses well
7. _____ A good dancer
8. _____ The act of dancing
9. _____ To have sexual intercourse
10. _____ A good talker
11. _____ To cope with unpleasant situations
12. _____ To have a good time

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